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ABSTRACT

This document presents some ideas about initial reading instruction in bilingual education. The bilingual programs created in 1969 seek the creation of equal educational opportunities through the use of instruction in a native language to children who speak a language other than English. Such programs attempt to teach two languages concurrently and to deal with subject matter instruction in both languages. The problem of teaching reading skills to accompany the oral language skills is a current topic of research. One reading theory states that the ability to understand what is read depends upon the child's experience with like subject matter as well as his comprehension of the language in which it is written. The "Initial Reading in Spanish" project produced a detailed, descriptive analysis of procedures used to teach Spanish-speaking children in Mexico to read in their native language. Evaluation of student achievement in the experimental use of the Mexican reading instruction methods in the United States indicates success in learning to read in both Spanish and English. (Author/VM)

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by

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THE BILINGUAL CHILD'S RIGHT TO READ

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American schools, unlike the traditional European system, were founded on the concept of education for all as opposed to education for the elite. In ancient and medieval Europe, schools were, of course, only for children of the rich. In more modern times, when schooling became available to the masses, grouping practices tended to pre-determine the educational level as well as the future work patterns of students. For example, the establishment of technical schools assigned very young children to a vocational course of study as opposed to a liberal arts curriculum. On the other hand, schools in the United States were established on the theoretical base that all individuals were entitled to the same educational opportunity. As it has become abundantly clear in recent years, this theory was not fully carried into practice. In this paper I shall point out some of the hindrances to the realization of such a theory within the system as it now exists.

In the past few years there have been dramatic and sometimes very effective moves toward integration of learning opportunities for various racial groups. More recently, we have seen efforts to provide a more democratic learning environment for students who are linguistically different from the English speaking majority student. For example, recent legislation in several states has abolished restrictions to and encouraged the use of a foreign language as the means of instruction in American classrooms. The Bilingual Education Programs Branch of the U.S. Office of Education has for the past three

years established programs of instruction, encouraged research and experimentation and promoted the cause of bilingual education. These bilingual programs have as their major goal the creation of equal educational opportunities through the use of instruction in a native language to children who speak a language other than English. One of the goals of bilingual education programs is the development of bilingual abilities in children who are English speaking. But it is the needs of the non-English speaking children and the effect upon those children of bilingual instruction that we shall deal with here. Traditionally these children have been taught to read in the language of the classroom—English, whereas their native language is Spanish, Chinese, Portuguese, or some other tongue.

Certainly the problem of educating great numbers of non-English speaking children cannot be minimized. In the New England states there are large numbers of French speaking youngsters; the northern midwest states contain children of Scandinavian and German backgrounds, and the Southwest, Florida and many urban centers of the East contain large Spanish speaking populations. In New York City alone, for example, there are more than 200,000 Puerto Rican and foreign-born Spanish speaking persons (1).

It is somewhat discouraging, however, to realize that the pattern of thinking with regard to the use of foreign languages in the instruction of core subjects is shaped by a traditional policy of insisting that all children who speak a foreign language and attend U.S. schools learn English. Many well-intentioned programs, both pre-school and in-school types, actually have induced failure in the early years by attempting to quickly teach children to understand, speak and deal with content matter in English. Prior to the introduction of large-scale bilingual education programs in this country, the most common programs available to children of foreign language backgrounds were those that attempted to teach English as a second language. It is not until recent years, with the introduction of Title VII programs in 1969, that widespread bilingual education programs came into existence. These programs differ from ESL curriculum efforts in that they attempt to teach two languages concurrently and to deal with subject matter instruction in both languages.

It is also important that we look at the effectiveness of programs that operated on the principle of teaching foreign speaking children in English. The situation is not encouraging. Instructional efforts that included the best methods and materials available, as well as considerable financial and community support, have produced -- minimal results. Large numbers of non-English speaking children continue to fail or fall behind their peers in classrooms operating on this base. The situation in the Southwest was summed up by Stemler: The annual reports filed by all school districts with the Texas Education Agency reveal that approximately 80% of all beginning first graders from a non-English speaking background failed the first grade because of their inability to read (2). Stemler is, of course, speaking only of failure to learn to read or failure attributable to the lack of the ability to read. School personnel and parents of Mexican-American children have repeatedly voiced concern over the high proportions of failures and dropouts among Mexican-American children. Some of the practices for assigning children to mentally retarded classrooms also are being questioned for their validity. Leary reports that an analysis of California's 65,000 mentally retarded children discloses that 2.14% of all the Spanish surnamed students in public schools have been directed into classes for the educable mentally retarded. Less than .71% of all of the Anglo students are so classified (3). To express this statistic in another way, California's Spanish surnamed students, who comprise approximately 15% of the total school population, represent over 28% of the total enrollment in classes for the educable mentally retarded.

With these statistics in mind, it must be said that a total English speaking curriculum for children who do not speak English fluently is an unacceptable educational setting. With respect to instruction in reading, it appears to be foolish, if not disastrous, to attempt to teach initial reading in English to those same children.

If it is not feasible to teach a young foreign speaking child English quickly in order to deal with concepts and reading instruction, what are some of the alternatives? One that appears promising is that of an intensive oral English program accompanied by instruction in content areas in the native language of the child. The intent of such native language instruction is to maintain development of

concepts and new skills like reading, while teaching children a second language, such as English. There are several advantages to such a plan. The first and perhaps most obvious is that second language acquisition is most effectively taught beginning with the oral language skills. In addition, with children of primary school age, the introduction of a second language comes at a time when most children acquire new language rapidly. Other advantages appear when the nature of reading is considered. Although there are those who still hold to the notion that precise identification of letters and words is an important phase of reading instruction for the young, it is generally agreed that mature readers rely more on context and other cues for comprehension. Present writers believe that beginning reading must involve the same strategies that mature reading does. In other words, there must be some degree of comprehension as a prerequisite for identification of graphs. Reading is not simply a matter of decoding or deciphering, but a process that depends on gathering several different cues together and forming a meaning from them.

Thonis emphasizes the importance of what the learner brings to the task of reading. The extent of the child's command of oral language, his experiential base and cognitive development all are considered important contributors to the rate of progress and degree of success in achieving literacy (4). The ability to understand what is read depends upon the child's experience with like subject matter as well as his comprehension of the language in which it is written.

In addition to the above points, the role of reading as a contributor to language development must also be taken into account. One of the real problems in bilingual education today is the fact that bilingual children come to school speaking a wide range of dialects. Among Spanish speaking bilingual children, for instance, there also will exist a range of fluency in Spanish from complete to minimal command of the language. It should be remembered that in the case of children who have limited or non-standard language ability, that language development and growth takes place best in the language of easiest communication; in this case, the language of the home.

Spolsky reports growing evidence to support the teaching of reading in the vernacular. In the Indian projects with which he has dealt, there is evidence of desire and, in fact, increasing pressure from Navajo leaders to teach reading in Navajo in order to increase its use and to maintain the language (5). Modiano, in a research study dealing with the teaching of reading in a vernacular in Mexico, reports that students who had first learned to read in their mother tongue read with greater comprehension in the second language than did those who had received all reading instruction in the latter (6). This research points to another possible advantage of initial reading in the vernacular—that is, the possibility of transfer of reading skills from the vernacular to the second language. Kaufman also reports evidence of the positive transfer of reading skills to a second language when reading instruction was accomplished in the mother tongue. In addition, he found no reliable evidence of interference between the two languages (7).

As has been pointed out, two of the major emphases of the standard curriculum are the development of oral language skills and growth in cognitive areas. This is true of bilingual education as well. In fact, because many bilingual education teachers were recruited from the ranks of foreign language teachers, and because foreign language teachers emphasize listening and speaking in their teaching, bilingual instructional programs tend to give major importance to the development of the oral language skills. This is certainly appropriate, since it is through these skills that the majority of information we exchange is communicated. In addition, oral skills and instruction in a foreign language to non-native English speaking children are extremely important in maintaining cognitive growth commensurate with chronological age.

Of equal importance and contributory to the development of conceptual growth is the skill of reading. If the teaching of literacy occupies a major portion of the early years of schooling for English speaking children, we must raise the question of spending a proportionate amount of time in teaching the skill of reading to monolingual or bilingual foreign language speaking children. We also must investigate the effectiveness of reading instruction in English to these children. The question would appear to be a mute one in relation to monolingual foreign language speaking children; it

would appear that they have every right to the development of the skill of reading and the same need for that skill as do English speaking children. The question is somewhat more complex in considering the case of bilingual children. Since the term bilingual implies the ability to comprehend and speak two languages, and because most school materials are available in English, it might at first seem most logical that these children be taught literacy in English. The question is not that simple. Because success depends, at least in part, on what linguistic and cognitive skills children bring to the task of learning to read, we must consider the question of language dominance. The child whose home and neighborhood encourage and permit him to use a foreign language for communication may well have to be considered as a foreign language dominant individual even though he is capable of operating in the English language.

Based on the research quoted above, as well as other informal investigations and through a series of discussions regarding the teaching of reading in Spanish, it would found that relatively little was known about the teaching of reading in Spanish to the Spanish speaking child, or about the process of transferring reading skills from Spanish to English. As a result of these discussions, and with the encouragement of Miss Elizabeth Keesee, Program Specialist, Bilingual Education Programs Branch, U.S. Office of Education, the project "Initial Reading in Spanish" was developed. The main emphasis of the project was to produce a detailed, descriptive analysis of procedures used to teach Spanish speaking children to read in their native tongue.

Preliminary investigations into reading programs in the United States revealed that Spanish speaking children were being taught to read English, as well as Spanish, utilizing the same procedures that are employed to teach monolingual English speakers to read their native tongue. Many methods in the teaching of literacy in English include ingenious and complex devices to show the underlying system in a written language that is intricate and often times irregular. The Spanish writing system, on the other hand, has a relatively uncomplicated phoneme-grapheme correspondence with few irregularities. It seems then that many of the methodologies employed to teach literacy in English do not apply to the teaching of that skill in Spanish.

Where does one go to learn about methodologies and materials used in effective teaching of literacy in Spanish? What better place than a Spanish speaking country itself. Mexico, being geographically near and having an education system which responded to initial inquiries enthusiastically, was selected as the site for preliminary field study of the reading process in Spanish as taught to Spanish speaking natives. Through the Ministry of Education in Mexico City, arrangements were made to visit a number of schools in which initial reading was being taught to Spanish speakers. A number of classrooms were visited in order to give a generous sampling of procedures used by different teachers. Videotapes were made in each of the selected classes so that a permanent record would be available for reference and study.

THE TEACHING OF READING IN MEXICO

Examination of the videotapes revealed the following generalities about the process used by most Mexican teachers observed.

1. *A phonic method was used in which children were taught to sound out individual letters in order to decipher words from the printed page.* In some cases letter names were used to identify the letters of the alphabet. Some teachers preferred to refer to the letters of the alphabet by their "sound names." The letter "s" was referred to with a sibilant, hissing sound, the letter "d" with the sound "duh," and so forth.
2. *Since almost all of the teachers used the textbooks provided by the federal government, the sequence of presentation of vowels and consonants differed very little.* Vowels were introduced initially starting with "o," continuing to "a," "e," "i," and "u." In order that these vowels might be presented in whole words, the consonants "s," "d," "l," and "t" were introduced in the first few lessons. Two or three lessons were spent teaching single words, but the teachers rapidly moved to the presentation of short phrases or sentences in order to teach new letters. In effect, then, children were reading short stories made up of four or five three-word phrases within a week or two from the beginning of reading instruction.

3. *Vowel and consonant presentation is initially limited to one vowel or one consonant per lesson.* In later class sessions several consonants are presented in the same lesson. Apparently, teachers and textbook writers feel that the alphabetic principle has been established in earlier lessons and that children are ready to learn more than one letter at a time.
4. *Vowel-consonant clusters are presented in later lessons after all letters of the alphabet have been introduced.* The consonant clusters "cr," "gl" and so forth, are normally introduced in combination with the five vowels. A reading is then given in which these clusters appear in combination with the vowels to afford students practice in reading them.
5. *An important phase of the instruction is the practice of writing and printing the letters that have been learned in the reading lesson.* The reading books used in the Mexican schools incorporate this procedure. Facing the reading page, a page is provided on which the students can practice writing and printing the letters that have been introduced on the previous page. A good deal of time is devoted to writing practice. Work both on the board and at individual desks provides opportunities for students to practice their writing and printing skills. It should be pointed out that Mexican students learn cursive and manuscript writing concurrently. Children in the observed classes learned to print and write both upper and lower case letters in the same lesson.
6. *In all classrooms the instruction was carried on using the entire group of 40 to 50 children.* There were no instances observed of individual reading instruction or of small group reading classes.
7. *Student responses were given mostly in choral repetition in the large group.* Children often read together as a total class, wrote from dictation given by the teacher and responded en masse to the teacher's questions. In some instances, teachers called children to the front of the room or had them stand at their desks to read aloud to the rest of the class.

Although the large group instruction sounds formal, there appeared to be an interesting and warm interaction between the teachers and students in Mexican

schools. The noise level in such classes was high, but it appeared to be a happy noise or at least one that was generated by work and interested interaction.

Teachers readily accepted comments and questions from pupils, although the questions may have been irrelevant or at least an aside from the work at hand.

Often, when a single child was called upon to read or perform at the blackboard, the rest of the class was busy performing the same work at their desks or coaching aloud the student at the board.

8. *Because of the emphasis on writing in the reading classes, students accumulate a large number of worksheets and papers.* The Mexican schools put these papers to an interesting use. At the end of the year, the worksheets and papers that students have accumulated are bound into a large book which then becomes the property of the student. According to the teachers who were interviewed, the book serves as a review reader for the student, and in several cases, serves to teach others in the same family to read at home.

The results of the study in which these methods were employed may be summarized as follows:

The children in the experimental classes did learn to read in both Spanish and English at about the same level of achievement for both languages. In other words, there were no significant differences in their scores on the Spanish and English reading tests.

The scores of the control group (non-Spanish speakers who received instruction in reading English only) were higher at two out of three sites. At the third site, children in the Spanish Reading Program scored as high as the control group. These differences appeared to be a function of the amount of time spent on learning to read. Because they had no time out for instruction in Spanish reading, the control group spent almost twice as much time in English reading activities.

Current research leaves unanswered the question of whether initial reading in the mother tongue of bilingual children offers real advantages. The native language study reported here focused mainly on a description of the methods used by Mexican reading teachers, but evaluations of student achievement indicate success in learning

to read both Spanish and English. Even if the children in such programs show no marked improvement in English language skills, other factors must be considered. They learn to read another language as well, and thus possess the key to continued cognitive growth. In addition, the use of mother tongue in the classroom appears to contribute to maintaining native language fluency and improving self-esteem and cultural awareness. If these gains can be attributed to initial reading in the child's native language, the method is well worth trying.

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